



## Overview Essay

### The Internment of Japanese-Americans During World War II

"I only ask that I be given a chance to fight to preserve the principles that I have been brought up on and which I will not sacrifice at any cost. Please give me a chance to serve in your armed forces." So wrote Henry Ebihara to Secretary of War Henry Stimson as the United States entered World War II. Eight thousand Japanese-Americans did eventually serve—with distinction—in the United States armed forces during World War II, despite the fact that over 110,000 were forced by the American government to relocate to remote and dismal internment camps. The Japanese-Americans living on the West Coast were declared a "security threat" by the government, and many Americans supported the federal government's decision to isolate those who seemed to pose such a threat. Fear, racism, and a desire for revenge after the bombing of Pearl Harbor—all fostered public support for a government policy that violated the civil rights of other American citizens.

The census of 1940 recorded 126,947 people of Japanese ancestry living in the United States, nearly two-thirds of them native-born Americans. Those first-generation Japanese who had emigrated from Japan or Hawaii were known as Issei. Their children were known as Nisei. The majority of these Japanese-Americans lived together in small communities on the West Coast. Here they operated small businesses and vegetable farms, pursuing their dreams just as other Americans did. However, unlike Americans of European ancestry, during World War II Japanese-Americans were to endure unjust treatment at the hands of their government.

#### War Hysteria

The attack on Pearl Harbor pitched the government into a quandary. Because the West Coast was believed vulnerable to Japanese attack, military experts worried that Japanese-Americans there might cooperate with the enemy. The public, meanwhile, clamored for the government to take action against the "enemy race" in its midst.

Soon after the attack on Pearl Harbor, the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) identified

about 2,100 Japanese-Americans as "dangerous enemy aliens" and arrested them. This did little to calm the fears of residents on the West Coast. Many people considered a Japanese invasion imminent and believed that no one of Japanese heritage could be trusted. On February 19, 1942, President Franklin Roosevelt signed Executive Order No. 9066 authorizing the Secretary of War "to prescribe military areas in such places and of such extent as he or the appropriate Military Commander may determine, from which any or all persons may be excluded."

General John DeWitt, the military commander responsible for executing the order, designated entire regions of California as "military areas" and asked Japanese residents to relocate voluntarily. Complying with the request, about eight thousand Japanese-Americans abandoned their homes and moved to other parts of the country.

On March 18 Roosevelt created the War Relocation Authority (WRA) to oversee the orderly evacuation of Japanese-Americans from the designated regions. DeWitt ordered Japanese residents on the West Coast to report to Wartime Civilian Control Centers.

## Overview Essay Continued

**The Duration**

By early August 1942, more than 110,000 Japanese-Americans had been forced to leave their homes. Permitted to take only a few possessions with them, many tried to sell their belongings but were forced to abandon what they could not carry or sell.

Japanese-Americans reported to centers to await transfer to internment camps. Patrolled by armed soldiers, the centers were hastily

converted racetracks, stadiums, and fairgrounds. There, the internees slept in horse stalls and under bleachers, sometimes for weeks at a time. Eventually they were moved to internment camps. To reach the camps, the internees were transported on crowded trains on which the shades were drawn so that the passengers would not know their destination.

Less than a year after Pearl Harbor, the government had evacuated most Japanese-Americans to WRA camps. Located in desolate areas and surrounded by barbed wire, the camps consisted of flimsy wooden barracks covered with tar paper. In some places, families occupied one-room "apartments" furnished only with cots and lit by a single light bulb. In others, candles and kerosene lamps provided the only light. The occupants bathed, dined, and laundered their clothes in communal areas; in Puyallup, Washington, one washroom served one hundred families.

Yet despite such conditions, most Japanese-Americans endured their confinement with patience and even tried to aid the war effort by making camouflage nets, painting recruiting posters, and experimenting on the development of artificial rubber for the War Production Board. A few internees brought lawsuits against the government claiming that they had been imprisoned illegally. When these cases reached the Supreme Court, the justices upheld the government's actions.

By the end of 1944, the government had released almost 35,000 Japanese-Americans from internment. But their release depended

on passing a loyalty test that contained such questions as "Will you try to develop such American habits which will cause you to be readily accepted into American social groups?" and "Can you furnish any proof that you have always been loyal to the United States?"

The government began closing the camps early in 1945, once the threat of a Japanese invasion had subsided. Now Japanese-Americans

faced the daunting task of rebuilding their lives.

Three years of confinement in internment camps had cost them an estimated total of \$350 million in lost property and income. Many would never fully recover their losses. Akana Imamura, a Japanese-

American who endured internment, wrote: "The life of most of us Issei is now well spent. We stand in the evening of life where there is no hope. . . . We are told and encouraged to relocate again into the world as a stranger in strange communities! We now have lost all security. WRA urges readjustment, relocating outside. Where shall we go? What shall we do at the twilight of the evening of our lives?"

When the last of the camps closed in 1946, many Japanese-Americans wanted nothing more than to put the whole grim experience behind them. Others, however, as loyal citizens desiring an apology and compensation, launched a long and frustrating campaign against the government.

In 1990, forty-five years later, the United States government finally admitted that it had violated the Constitution by internment Japanese-Americans during World War II and agreed to pay \$20,000 to each one of the sixty thousand surviving internees. "The U.S. must never again allow such a swerve from its principles," commented an article in the *Christian Science Monitor*. "When conflict abroad results in serious violations of liberty at home, the defeat is as serious as any a foreign adversary can deal."

"We are told and encouraged to relocate again into the world as a stranger in strange communities! . . . Where shall we go?"

# Korematsu v. United States (1944)

## Vocabulary

**executive order** A regulation or order issued by the President to enforce a treaty or law; it does not require congressional approval but has the force of law.

**curfew** A regulation requiring a certain group to be off the streets and in their homes at a certain time.

## Reviewing the Case

After the Japanese bombing of Pearl Harbor in December 1941, the United States entered the war against the Axis powers—Germany, Italy, and Japan. The attack on Hawaii had made many American leaders and ordinary citizens increasingly fearful about security on the West Coast of the United States. In response to those fears, President Franklin D. Roosevelt issued **Executive Order #9066** in February 1942.

The order authorized the creation of military areas in which military authorities had the power to remove or exclude whomever they wished. The first area included the entire West Coast to about 40 miles inland. Based on the executive order, military officials first imposed a **curfew** on “all persons of Japanese ancestry,” including those born in the United States and those who had become citizens. Later, the military commander ordered all persons of Japanese ancestry to leave their homes and report to assembly centers. From there they were sent to relocation camps farther inland, away from the coast.

The government claimed the curfew and the relocations were necessary to prevent sabotage, spying, or giving help to a possible Japanese invasion force. Disobeying the military orders was made a crime by act of Congress. Several lawsuits were brought to challenge this violation of the civil rights of citizens.

Fred (Toyosaburo) Korematsu was arrested for staying in San Leandro, California, instead of going to a relocation center. Born in California, Korematsu was a defense-plant

worker in his 20's. He had tried to join the Army but could not pass the physical. Rather than going to a center, he posed as Chinese. After being caught and arrested, he was convicted in federal district court of violating the military's “Civilian Exclusion Order.” Conviction carried a maximum fine of \$5,000 or up to one year in prison, or both.

Korematsu appealed the decision, unsuccessfully, to the Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals for California on the grounds that his rights under the Fourth, Fifth, Eighth, and Thirteenth Amendments had been violated. He was sent to a relocation camp in Utah. Korematsu then appealed to the U.S. Supreme Court.

The issue before the Court: Are Executive Order #9066 and the act of Congress enforcing it constitutional uses of the war powers of the President and Congress?

The Supreme Court ruled by a vote of 6–3 to uphold the decision of the lower courts against Korematsu. The Court ruled according to the precedent set a year earlier in *Hirabayashi v. United States*. Kiyoshi Hirabayashi had been convicted of violating the curfew law, which applied only to Japanese Americans. On appeal, the Court had ruled that Hirabayashi's rights had not been violated unconstitutionally because the curfew was within the limits of the war powers. In the interests of national security, the Court said, military authorities could do what they thought was necessary in sensitive areas; Congress had the right to give this power.

The Court's reasoning in both cases can be summed up in the words of Justice Hugo Black's opinion in *Korematsu*:

It should be noted, to begin with, that all legal restrictions which curtail the civil rights of a single racial group are immediately suspect. That is not to say that all such restrictions are unconstitutional. It is to say that courts must subject them to the most rigid scrutiny. . . . Compulsory exclusion of large groups of citizens from their

homes, except under circumstances of direst emergency and peril, is inconsistent with our basic governmental institution. But when under conditions of modern warfare our shores are threatened by hostile forces, the power to protect must be commensurate [equal] with the threatened danger. . . .

The majority opinion stated that the quick judgments necessary during a war served as justification for the action, even though it brought hardships to many loyal people of Japanese descent. Continuing the majority opinion, Black denied that the policy had a racist intent:

Korematsu was not excluded from the Military Area because of hostility to him or his race. He was excluded because we are at war with the Japanese Empire, because the properly constituted military authorities feared an invasion of our West Coast and felt constrained to take proper security measures, because they decided that the military urgency of the situation demanded that all citizens of Japanese ancestry be segregated from the West Coast temporarily, and finally, because Congress, reposing its confidence in this time of war in our military leaders . . . determined that they should have the power to do just this.

The Court at the time did not rule on the constitutional issues and the questions of civil rights involved in these cases, only on the use of the war powers.

The three dissenting justices—Roberts, Murphy, and Jackson—thought that the policy was racist and unconstitutional. Justice Jackson feared that the decision gave the approval of the Constitution to an emergency military policy. The dissenting justices also pointed out that no effort had been made to identify individual Japanese Americans who might be disloyal, as had been done with some Germans and Italians. They claimed the policy violated the civil rights of an entire group of citizens solely on the basis of their ancestry.

As a result of this policy, about 112,000 Japanese Americans were forced to spend the war years behind the barbed wire fences of remote and primitive camps in the West. Many lost pleasant homes and prospering farms and businesses. President Harry Truman officially lifted the order in 1946, after the war was over. In the mid-1980's, more Americans were coming to believe that the incident had been racist to at least some extent. Under pressure, Congress authorized the payment of damages to those who had been held in relocation camps.